



Justice Manna: Leadership and Torah Entwined

Benjamin Ross

Twenty years after my bar mitzvah I found myself, once again, grappling with Jewish text in preparation for a *d'var Torah* before my congregation. The occasion this time: we had launched a synagogue organizing initiative, and I was a leader in the effort.

The *parasha* was *Beshalach*: the Hebrews are fleeing Egypt, heading into the desert. They have no idea how they will survive, and many regret leaving the predictability of slavery.

God instructs Moses that *manna* (Divine food) will rain down each day. But if it is stored for future consumption, it will rot and become inedible. This provision of *manna* cultivates the Hebrews' faith in God's daily presence. On the sixth day of the week a double portion rains down, and from this the Hebrews learn that Shabbat is their day of rest and observing Shabbat will not hurt their livelihood.

As I read the *parasha*, I realized that being engaged in organizing through my shul, with its commitment to Torah study, had become my *manna*. For the first time, my Jewish justice soul was nourished on a regular basis. Like the Hebrews in the desert, an expectation and anticipation of Torah engagement and reflection was being inculcated, drawing me closer to Judaism by grounding my actions in the world of Torah and community. Celebrating Shabbat became integral to my life and supportive of my leadership.

Earlier, I had spent ten years organizing for tenant rights and advocating for immigrant rights with Black, Latino, and immigrant communities. At that time, I had little or no contact with a synagogue. But through synagogue organizing, I began a very public and powerful relationship with Torah as a living story. Stories came alive, no longer static words in an ancient scroll. Rather than advocating for others, I became a leader as a Jew for justice. Standing at a Kabbalat Shabbat service, I urged my fellow congregants to take a step forward to support one of our campaigns. While the issue could have been about a woman's right to choose, fair trade coffee, healthcare access, or literacy issues, the context was more important: I was mobilizing other Jews to act powerfully and publicly from our faith values, to do justice in partnership with others.

Now, I lead the CBCO work of the Jewish Funds for Justice, supporting the synagogue organizing field since 2002, through leadership development, small grants and direct partnership with denominations, organizing groups and synagogues, and convening national gatherings. I regularly hear stories from synagogue leaders that this type of

organizing draws people closer to Judaism — and it happens in relationship with leaders in other faith traditions.

Rabbi Janet Marder, whose California synagogue has been organizing for six years, explains that this model is “not based on disinterested philanthropy, in which affluent folks reach out to give to those less fortunate. Rather, it teaches people to build bridges across culture and race, connecting with others as equals, uniting with them in significant action to improve the quality of life within the community we share.”

The foundational work of synagogue organizing is hundreds of one-to-one conversations where congregants connect, stories emerge, and leaders are identified. People talk about what keeps them up at night and why tzedek, justice, is important. Probing questions sift through commonalities of concern within the congregation, becoming the basis for action. And through action, leaders learn how to be powerful in the public arena, in their synagogue, and in their own lives.

These relationships dramatically enhance my davening. When I arrive on Shabbat, instead of a sea of faces I see a sea of stories. This person's mother survived the Holocaust, that person was active in civil rights struggles and then became a corporate lawyer, another person responded to the religious right's attacks on pro-choice leaders by taking three months leave to work for voter turnout.

Over the past year, I have crisscrossed the country hearing stories of lay leaders — even teens — moving closer to Torah and God through organizing, and strengthening their capacity to be Jewish leaders. Synagogue organizing allows us to be real partners with other communities and real partners with Judaism; nourishing our souls and nourishing our communities. Congregation-based Organizing:

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